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ABSTRACT

The paper traces the life of the 18th century North Carolinian planter Willie Jones and his transformed political stance from traditional commitment to the Crown to a new constitutional faith in republicanism. Jones' political career and struggles are noted through the Revolutionary era and the controversy of centralized versus decentralized government that followed. Jones became the undisputed leader of the radical faction of republican politicians in North Carolina and favored popular control over the government. Declining to be a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he nevertheless significantly changed the temper of North Carolina's delegation by taking a conservative and Antifederalist stance to prevent government oppression. His unique position advocated a free and independent state, democratic administration, and improved education for the people. Though thwarted to an extent by a bill of rights that eased Antifederalist apprehensions, his death did not end his influence and his tradition still has local influence today. (TRS)

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WILLIE JONES: THE ALTERNATE VIEW OF A NORTH CAROLINA ANTIFEDERALIST

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WILLIE JONES: THE ALTERNATE VIEW OF A NORTH CAROLINA ANTIFEDERALIST

While Willie Jones has been portrayed as the outstanding radical of North Carolina in the latter part of the 18th century, he ill fits the conventional mold for that political faction. Born to and reared in a wealthy family that seemed to possess endless plantations, Jones reflected and represented the interest of that class of planters prior to the Revolutionary Era. Nevertheless, toward the end of his career, North Carolinians felt he had become so devoted to the republicianism unleashed by the Revolution that they honored him with the title of the "Jefferson of North Carolina." What manner of man was this Willie Jones, and what was his Antifederalist alternate view for the nation in 1787?

Born in Charles City County, Virginia, what is now known as Prince George County, on 25 May 1741, his father, Robert, in the early 1750s, moved to Northampton County, North Carolina about six miles from Halifax and built his plantation home, "The Castle."[1] Serving as agent for Lord Granville and attorney for the Crown, as well as serving in the Assembly, Robin Jones acquired immense tracts of land and was probably the largest landed proprietor on the Roanoke River when he died in 1766.

Willie attended Eton, his father's alma mater, and made the customary "grand tour" of the continent. All indications are that the young man enjoyed the good life. He was,

nonetheless, a thoughtful and, many thought, eccentric young man. Willie returned to North Carolina and to his father's home, although he preferred to live in Halifax, a town that enjoyed a "tolerable share of commerce" and that boosted a society "considered the most polished and cultivated in the state."[2] There he built a fine house, "The Groves," which was said to have the first bay-window in America. From his Halifax home Jones controlled his vast estate, entertained in the grand style of a gentleman, and engaged in popular pasttimes of fox hunting, gambling and horse racing, which he watched from his bay-window on his private race track. On 27 June 1776, he married Mary Montfort and they had thirteen children, only five of whom lived to maturity.

The year after the death of his father, voters in Halifax sent Willie to the Assembly, and there, he followed in the tradition of his father and supported the policies of the Crown. In the late 1760s and early 1770s, Jones seems firmly committed to the Crown, serving with Governor William Tryon in the expedition against the Regulators in 1771 and, in fact, leading a raiding party in its attack on the plantation of Herman Husband, a leader of the Regulators. Jones also received high praise from Governor Josiah Martin, the last Royal governor. In such high esteem did Governor Martin hold Jones that he secured for Jones, only after considerable effort on Martin's part, a coveted appointment to the Governor's Council in 1774. By this time, however, Jones had become swept-up in the Revolutionary upheaval and refused to accept the position. Martin, in the meantime,

altered his evaluation of Jones and now expressed his new conviction that Jones had taken such a "part in the present distempered times that I conceive he is of very unfit principles for such a station."[3] To the extent that a tranformation in Jones had occurred, it had been prompted by the events of the day. He now became an advocate of what was to emerge as the new constitutional faith of republicanism. For the rebels of the Americans Revolution, the explicit consent of the governed became the necessary basis of good government and political happiness. They rejected the English theory of virtual representation and demanded that their deputy theory of representation be accepted.[4] Jones now allied himself with these forces of the age, forces that would shortly call for independence from England.

The problem was that republicanism in this turblent and confused age of revolution had a split personality. One side of its personality emphasised the need for centralization of governmental authority, a strong executive, a government controlled and directed by men of property and status. The other side of the republican personality demanded a decentralized government, leaving to local communities the maintenance of order and protection of liberty. Some recent writers have suggested that the roots of this split in American republican thought are to be found in the cleavage in English politics after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.[5] Politics were divided between "Court" and "Country" factions. According to these writers, "Court"

politics embraced commerical activities and metropolitan interest; they favored a strong central government capable of commanding great respect abroad and maintaining order at home. To achieve those ends they wanted to instill in government the ability to act with vigor and the capacity to develop rational planned policies. In order to achieve those ends, the "Court" faction recognized the need for a professional bureaucracy to administer the agencies charged with the responsibility for the day to day affairs of state, agencies such as the Bank of England to carry forward their financial and administrative goals. Finally, "Court" politicians believed a professionalized standing army was necessary for the modern state. J.G.A. Pocock has called the "Court" approach "the transition from the agrarian world of the Middle Ages to the mercantile and specialized world" of the centralized modern state.[6] Some of these historians have traced the "Court-minded" policies into the nationalist movement of the 1780s and in the policies of Alexander Hamiliton in the George Washington administration.

The "Country" ideology, on the other hand, opposed the "Court" policies. It found its strength in the landed gentry class, the agrarian and localist element who felt order and liberty could best be protected at the local level. They wanted to retain a decentralized political world that was being replaced by developments in business, technology and commerce. They preached the necessity of eternally being vigilant and suspicious of government to prevent the abuse of power. In eighteenth century England,

"Country" ideology did not advocate expansion of the right to vote but was the argument of embattled agrarians defending their property and rights against the incursions of sinister new forces abroad in the land. Again, these ideas have been traced to the language of the Jeffersonians in their conflict with the Hamilitonian Federalists of the 1790s and it has been suggested that the "Country" ideology dominated the political discourse in the United States until the Civil War.

Most historians seem to agree that republicianism of the Revolution Era demanded that the people have an actual not mythical control of government, and that government should be so organized as to prevent the exercise of arbitrary power by elected officials. According to his biographer, Jones became the undisputed leader of the radical faction of republican politicians in North Carolina. The radicals favored expansion of the suffrage, popular election of judges, and limited executive authority. Jones--the well-born, Eton-educated, gentleman of fine dress and expensive taste--must have felt some discomfort as a member of the group. Politics, of course, were very individualized and personal in this period. In 1777 Jones voted against a bill to expand the franchise; and the next year he voted against a bill to increase the pay of members of the Assembly, in all ages a fundamental necessity if the "people" are to have an active role in government. Nevertheless, "radicals" in North Carolina politics sought to bring the executive, legislative, judicial branch, the

entire government under popular control. The legislature, frequently elected by the people, should actually dominate the government, they felt. Conservative republicans sought to check the twin dangers of aristocratic privilege and "democratic despotism" by preventing concentration of power in any branch of government, especially the legislature. Only by carefully balancing power between all branches and placing checks on each branch could the dangers of despotism be avoided. They wanted a strong executive, an independent judiciary, and favored giving such a weighted position to property in government that opponents called them monarchists.

In the North Carolina Constitution of 1776, the legislature emerged as the dominate branch of government, although it was elected by voters who had to meet property requirements and was based, to some extent, upon counties and some towns. Article 32 of the Constitution denied office to all except those who confessed the "Being of God, or the Truth of the Protestant Religion, or the divine Authority either of the Old or New Testament."[7] Being a deist, Jones was strongly opposed to that section.

The Revolution in North Carolina took on the character of a civil war. One method adopted by North Carolina rebels to deal with Loyalists was a series of confiscation acts. Jones opposed them, siding with conservatives on one of the most important issues of the day, as he did on so many issues. His stance brings into question whether he was, in any meaningful sense, a "radical" prior to the fight over

ratification of the Constitution. But on the other great issue of the day, reforming the weak Articles of Confederation, he did not share the views of his conservative friends. A committed states righter, he favored "an independent state democracy administered along fraternal lines and with just so much connection with the other states as to insure peace between them."[8] When chosen as a delegate to the Philadelphia Convention, Jones declined the honor. One can only speculate why Jones refused to attend the convention in Philadelphia. Possibly it was because of pressing financial obligations in North Carolina; possibly it was because he thought the delegates would adhere to their instructions and only revise the Articles of Confederation. But the fact that he declined to serve significantly changed the temper of the North Carolina delegation. In Jones's place, Governor Richard Caswell replaced Jones with Doctor Hugh Williamson, an individual who favored a more powerful central government. Hardly had the Convention completed its work, when Jones took up the challenge and became, as William R. Davie noted, "perfectly anti-federal."[9]

Although Antifederalists did not adhere to a single unified philosophy, two essential ingredients emerge from their views, founded as they were upon the "Country" philosophy. First, they preferred a weak decentralized government severly limited in power. As they saw it, the issue was authority versus liberty. Antifederalists continued the struggle launched in the Revolution for local

self-rule and individual freedom guaranteed by a bill of rights; if republican conservatives or nationalists, the "Court-minded," group feared instability, antifederalists feared oppression from a distant centralized government endowed with sufficient power to be effective. Consolidated governments employed standing armies to achieve their ends, and antifederalists believed power defused meant liberty and power concentrated meant oppression. The second core belief of the Antifederalists was their demand that the fundamental rights of the individual must be expressed in a bill of rights, limiting the grant of power to government. They also favored annual elections which would force constant approval of government policy by the people and, they hoped, promote rotation of office holders. Since the legislative body was close to the people from whom sovereignty came, it should be the dominate branch of government. In short, Antifederalists believed the two avenues to prevent governmental oppression were popular control and denial of powers which might be abused.

From Halifax Jones directed the campaign in eastern and northeastern North Carolina for election of Antifederalist delegates to the state ratification convention which met 21 July 1788 at Hillsboro. To his followers, he presented a well developed attack upon the Constitution, which his lieutenants called the "W. Jones's system."[10] Looking to Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry of Virginia for leadership, Jones's system advocated (1) a free and absolutely independent state (2) democratic administration,

and (3) improvement in education for the people. In addition, Jones raised questions about the power of Congress to tax, the role of the federal judiciary, and the failure to safeguard freedom of conscience. To achieve his ends at the Hillsboro Convention, Jones developed his strategy based upon an early assessment of the Constitution from Jefferson, who was observing the American scene from Paris. Jefferson urged that nine states should approve the Constitution and that the remaining four should withhold approval until amendments, including a bill of rights, had been adopted. Jones was willing for North Carolina to remain outside the Union until that had been accomplished, preferably through a second federal convention.[11]

Among Antifederalists leaders in other states, Jones's position was unique. He commanded a majority in the convention; he had a carefully developed program; and he followed it with determination. After agreeing to a clause by clause discussion of the Consitution, Jones and his supporters responded to the James Iredell led discussion with little more than "word-quibbling and scarcasm."[12] Their complaints included the lack of a bill of rights, the new government's control over paper money, the assumption of state debts, and the fear that the new governmnet would be dominated by the northern states. The implication was clear: under this proposed governmental arrangement, they would lose their rights individually, and the South would lose its collective rights. The Convention voted 183 to 84 "neither to ratify nor reject" the Consitution.[13] Jones

supported a resolution that recommended to the state legislature that when Congress passed a law for collecting impost, North Carolina should collect the sum and remit it to Congress.

At the Hillsboro Convention, Jones had achieved precisely what he wanted. Confident that Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia would support North Carolina when the time came, he thought a second federal convention would soon materialize to modify the Constitution. During the early struggle and at Hillsboro, Jones was successful, in part, because he avoided the mistakes of Antifederalists elsewhere: he developed a plan of action and never deviated from it.

In the aftermath, tempers continued to flare. Jones felt compelled to deny that he had ever impugned the motives of delegates at the Philadelphia Convention or called George Washington a scoundrel. Madison, that ever perceptive observer of events, feared North Carolina's action kept alive the hopes for a second federal convention. As 1788 faded and 1789 progressed, the second convention idea, spawned with such hope in 1787, was quietly laid to rest. Madison's efforts to secure a bill of rights certainly eased the apprehensions of Antifederalists in North Carolina. Jones refused to be a candidate for the Fayetteville Convention that met in November, 1789 to consider the question of ratification a second time. At the Convention, the situation was almost a complete reversal of the events in Hillsboro, but Jones's followers behaved "with good humor" as they marched to defeat.[14] North Carolina's

ratification of the Constitution marked Jones's deemphasis on political activities. He does not seem to be one of Cecelia Kenyon's "Men of Little Faith," but he did have a different faith, an alternate view for the constitutional order of the new nation.[15]

Jones's tradition as a spokesman for the "Country" ideology in North Carolina did not end with his death in 1801 but was passed to Nathaniel Macon who dominated North Carolina politics for the next generation. In a state that in the 1980s still refuses to permit the governor to veto legislation, the shadow of Willie Jones can still be seen.

NOTES

1. This essay has been drawn from the works listed below as sources for further reading. When quoting directly from a work, I have provided the appropriate citation.
2. Quoted in Blackwell P. Robinson, William R. Davie (Chapel Hill, 1957), 143.
3. Blackwell P. Robinson, "Willie Jones of Halifax," in North Carolina Historical Review XVIII (Jan., 1941), 10-11. The second part of this study appeared in the April, 1942 issue of ibid.
4. Alfred H. Kelly, Winfred A. Harbison, and Herman Belz, The American Constitution Its Origins and Development (New York, 1983), 68-74. This general study of American constitutional history provides an excellent introduction to and overview of the period.
5. John M. Murrin, "The Great Inversion, or Court Versus Country: A Comparison of the Revolution Settlements in England (1688-1721) and America (1776-1816)" in J.G.A. Pocock, ed., Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776 (Princeton, 1980), 368-430.
6. Quoted in James H. Hutson, "Country, Court, and Constitution: Antifederalism and the Historian," in William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser. (July, 1981), 357. Hutson's essay is an excellent review of the literature in the field.
7. Robinson, "Willie Jones," part I, 25.
8. Ibid., part II, 147.
9. Ibid., 148.

10. Ibid., 149.

11. Robert Allen Rutland, The Ordeal of the Constitution (Norman, 1966), 254.

12. Ibid., 274.

13. Jonathan Elliot, ed., The Debates .... Vol. 4, 251.

14. Rutland, The Ordeal, 303.

15. Cecelia Kenyon, "Men of Little Faith: The Anti-Federalist on the Nature of Representative Government," in William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser. (1955), 3-43.

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_____, " Willie Jones of Halifax," North Carolina Historical Review, (Jan., 1941), 1-26 and (April, 1941), 135-170.

Rutland, Robert Allen, The Ordeal of the Constitution (Norman, 1966). Chapters XIV and XV deal, in part, with Willie Jones.

Trenholme, Louise Irby, North Carolina and the Ratification of the Federal Constitution (New York, 1932). A dated but still a very valuable source.